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SUBJECT: ON LEBANON'S PRESIDENCY, NAJIB MIKATI SAYS SAUDIS
"LOST" REGARDING WHAT TO DO

REF: STATE 148539

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) In a 10/31 meeting with the Ambassador, former Prime Minister Najib Mikati (once and perhaps still close to the Syrian regime) mused that Damascus has two preferred options for Lebanon's presidential elections: first, extending the status quo (with Emile Lahoud remaining in Baabda Palace beyond his term's 11/23 expiration), or, second, a "half-plus-one" March 14 president that would permit pro-Syrian forces to counterattack, causing violence and chaos that Syria will exploit. Recounting recent meetings in Saudi Arabia including with King Abdullah, Mikati described the Saudis as "lost," unwilling to either engage or confront Syria regarding Lebanon. With the exception of Jordanian King Abdullah, Mikati found other Arab leaders equally unfocused on Lebanon. As for presidential candidates, Mikati quoted Nabih Berri as reporting that Saad Hariri agreed on the desirability of a weak compromise figure rather than a strong March 14 president. Hariri's problem is selling his allies on the idea. Manifesting the Sunni version of the Maronite disease, Mikati also mused ambitiously about who would be Lebanon's next prime minister, given what he said is the Saudi desire that Hariri should wait until after legislative elections and Hizballah's absolute veto over the return of Fouad Siniora. The Ambassador also delivered to Mikati reftel message about potential actions the USG could take against those who would support a second cabinet or extension of Lahoud's presidential term. End summary.

MIKATIS TO STAY ON THE SIDE
OF THE LEGITIMATE CABINET

2. (S) The Ambassador met former Prime Minister Najib Mikati on 10/31. Given Mikati's once (and perhaps ongoing) close ties to Syria's al-Asad family and the Mikati family's extensive wealth, the Ambassador reviewed (per reftel) the potential steps the USG could take against anyone supporting a second cabinet in Lebanon, violence against the legitimate cabinet, or an extension of Emile Lahoud's presidential term beyond its midnight 11/23 expiration. Mikati listened with

interest, told the Ambassador that the Mikatis had no intention of opposing the legitimate cabinet, and called his perpetually unkempt but reportedly brilliant nephew Azmi (who runs the Mikati business empire and is rumored to have increased his links with Bashar al-Asad to compensate for Uncle Najib's tactical retreat from contact with Bashar) to join the meeting to hear the message repeated. While making it clear that the Mikatis would not risk their fortune, Azmi grumpily accused the USG of interfering in domestic politics. How, he asked, is the national security interests of the United States harmed if Lahoud stays in Baabda Palace an extra week while the Lebanese try to work out their differences?

MIKATI BELIEVE SYRIA PREFERS STATUS QUO EXTENDED
OR CHAOS A "HALF-PLUS-ONE" ELECTIONS WOULD PROVOKE

13. (C) With Azmi out of the room, Mikati posed the same question all Lebanese now ask: what is going to happen to Lebanon? The Ambassador bounced the question back to Mikati. Mikati mused that the pro-Syrians aren't as enamored with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as the rumors indicate. In his analysis, Syria prefers either of two options. One option is simply an extension of the status quo, with Lahoud staying in Baabda Palace, Siniora staying in the Grand Serail, and time working to Syria's benefit, to strengthen Syria's allies in Lebanon. The second option is the March 14 "half-plus-one" absolute majority presidential elections. Damascus, Mikati claimed, is eager for March 14 to proceed in this direction, knowing that pro-Syrians would then have an excuse to act and take to the streets. Syria probably calculates it can use the resulting chaos and violence to reassert a direct role in Lebanon and get the United States to open dialogue.

MIKATI'S FIVE CHOICES (IN PRIORITY ORDER):

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SALEMEH, RIZK, GHANEM, QORTBAWI, SLEIMAN

14. (C) If presidential elections happen, Mikati noted (as he has before) that former MP Nassib Lahoud is head-and-shoulders better than the rest of the candidates. But Nassib Lahoud will only succeed his cousin Emile if the international community forces Syria and Hizballah to accept him. "That is clearly not happening," Mikati said, arguing that without sustained, concentrated international support for Nassib, his election would result in civil war. So, focusing on who might be realistic, Mikati listed in descending order his own choice for president: Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, MP Robert Ghanem, former law association head Shakib Qortbawi, and LAF Commander Michel Sleiman. In Mikati's (probably not entirely objective) view, the pro-Syrian charges against any of these five are not credible. He reviewed positive and negative qualities of each, shedding little new light on their characters.

MICHEL AOUN: PETTY, DERANGED

15. (C) Digressing to talk about "that crazy guy," Mikati said that Michel Aoun remains one of the key obstacles to a solution on the presidency. Aoun still has 22 deputies in his coalition, enough to make any presidential elections legitimate, should he team up with March 14. Mikati claimed that pro-Syrian former MP Suleiman Franjieh (who is close to Mikati's brother Taha) has "had it" with Aoun. Franjieh realizes Aoun will not be president and thus tried to nudge his erstwhile ally into agreeing to stand aside for a consensus choice. Aoun reluctantly agreed but then became enraged when Franjieh told Maronite Patriarch Sfeir of Aoun's willingness to forgo his own candidacy. In retaliation, Aoun then invited Franjieh's hated cousin Samir (a March 14 MP) to a meeting. In the Sopranos-like atmosphere of the Franjieh

hometown of Zghorta, Suleiman was deeply humiliated by Aoun's reception of his arch-rival, with Suleiman's followers asking him why his supposed ally Aoun would receive the hated Samir.

THIRD-HAND REPORT ON HARIRI-BERRI TALKS:
NEITHER WANT STRONG CHRISTIAN PRESIDENT

¶6. (S) Mikati said that he had a "very interesting" meeting with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri a few days earlier, in which Berri talked privately about his discussions with Saad Hariri over the presidency. According to Mikati, Saad complained to Berri about his allies Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea as being too insistent on a March 14 president. Saad was, by contrast, ready to make a deal. Berri told Mikati that he and Saad had agreed on a candidate for whom "you didn't need to button your jacket," a reference to not needing to show deference or respect. Berri claimed that he and Hariri had agreed that the two of them should "share" the presidency, with the successful candidate equally beholden to each. Mikati worried that Berri and Hariri are underestimating Christian sensitivities, the potential for Christian rage, and the likelihood that Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea would join forces to humiliate and weaken any president chosen primarily by Hariri and Berri. The Ambassador also cautioned Mikati that he might not want to ascribe too much credibility to what Berri told him of Hariri's comments.

SAUDIS "LOST," EGYPTIANS "CLUELESS"
ON WHAT TO DO ABOUT LEBANON

¶7. (S) While noting that his information was slightly stale at this point, Mikati noted that, while he was in Saudi Arabia recently performing the umra ("little Hajj"), he had the occasion for consultations with many Arab leaders. Among the Saudis, he saw King Abdullah, Prince Sultan, Prince Mugrin, and Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdulaziz Khoja (who for security reasons is now only rarely in Lebanon). The Saudis are "lost," with the King absolutely opposed to any constructive engagement with Syria. Yet Saudi Arabia also wants to avoid a clash in Lebanon, so Saudi Arabia is

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unwilling to push for a confrontational president against Syrian wishes. The Kuwaitis were entirely focused on Iran and Iraq. The Qataris professed an intellectual interest in Lebanon but seemed far more committed to quiet development of ties with Israel in ways that benefited the Qatari economy. Only Jordanian King Abdullah seemed to be following Lebanon developments closely. Yet while King Abdullah's analysis of the situation was "excellent," the Jordanian monarch has little influence on events in Lebanon. "We can't count on the Arabs," Mikati concluded.

PRIME MINISTER: IF NOT SAAD,
IF NOT FOUAD, THEN WHO?

¶8. (C) Mikati noted that, even if presidential elections take place, a crisis will emerge over the cabinet formation and cabinet program. He said that even the selection of a Prime Minister will be hard. "You want Siniora to stay," Mikati said. The trouble is that Hizballah and Syria will attempt to veto Siniora. Given how quickly everyone accepted the idea that Hizballah can rule out March 14 presidential candidates, the Europeans and Arabs will also accept a Hizballah veto on Siniora, Mikati mused. In addition, Hariri doesn't want Siniora to come back, for fear that Siniora will permanently eclipse him.

¶9. (C) At the same time, the Saudis told Mikati that they have already advised Hariri to wait to become PM only after the next legislative elections (currently scheduled for

summer 2009). While Khoja told Mikati that Hariri resisted the message, eventually Hariri will have no choice but to accept it. Mikati said that this leaves "a big question mark" over who will become PM in case of new presidential elections (which trigger a change in cabinet). "No way" will Hariri accept former Justice Minister Bahije Tabbarah, who Mikati claimed is now working with Saad's elder brother Baha', who believes he, not Saad, should head the Hariri political dynasty. (Note: Mikati's questions made it fairly obvious that he was considering himself as the most likely fall-back contender for the PM. End note.)

COMMENT

¶10. (S) Our main point in seeing Mikati was (per the message in reftel) to emphasize the dangers to his travel plans and business empire, should the Mikatis give support to a second cabinet or something equivalent. To be fair, we never imagined that the cautious Najib would do anything that would risk his political viability (ergo, the dearth of Mikati appearances in Damascus these past two years). But the Mikati brothers adeptly divide responsibilities: Najib nurtures contacts with the West, and Taha keeps the links open to Damascus. With Taha's son Azmi immediately grasping the seriousness of our message, we are confident that the Mikatis won't support a second cabinet or its equivalent.

¶11. (S) As for Najib's professed admiration for Nassib Lahoud, we believe it is sincere and self-serving at the same time. If we've heard the "N-and-N" ("Nassib and Najib") proposal as a way to induce Syria into allowing Lahoud to become president, surely it has reached the ears of our friend Najib as well. Given that the Prime Minister will change again in a year and a half at most (with legislative elections), we'd far rather see a compromise on the PM than the President, who is scheduled to be around for six years. Najib did an excellent job as transitional PM in 2005 and could do so again in 2008. But it is clear by the amount of fuss and opposition against Nassib Lahoud's candidacy that the pro-Syrians, too, realize the importance of the presidency in this period.

FELTMAN